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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 002029

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF AND DRL/AWH

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: USCIRF MEETS WITH DISSIDENTS IN HANOI

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Jon Aloisi for Reasons 1.4 (b), (c), and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) A delegation from the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) met with Hanoi-based political dissidents, attorney Le Quoc Quan and Dr. Pham Hong Son, on October 22 and 23, respectively. According to both, all un-sanctioned political and religious organizations threaten the State, and Vietnam's legal framework on religion is a mechanism of State control and surveillance designed to please the international community, although private belief and spirituality are allowed. Both dissidents said economic development without democracy will serve to concentrate more power with the political elite. Quan, a Catholic, cited excessive control on religious training and instruction and noted the significant problem facing religious organizations of religious properties previously appropriated by the State. Son argued that the Government of Vietnam (GVN) is afraid of legitimizing the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) because of fear of the popularity of its charismatic leader. Son discussed with USCIRF staff members his covert democracy activism and the development of a plan to bring a multi-party political system to Vietnam. Both asked for the USG to remain engaged and consistently press the regime on human rights and adherence to international standards. End Summary.

ATTORNEY LE QUOC QUAN

2. (C) On October 22, the USCIRF delegation met with former National Endowment for Democracy (NED) fellow, political prisoner, and disbarred attorney Le Quoc Quan at his office in Hanoi. Attorney Quan, who knew one of the USCIRF staff members from his NED fellowship in Washington, DC earlier in the year, described for the USCIRF delegation events leading up to his arrest upon his return to Vietnam from the United States in March 2007. He believes the critical incident was a February speech he gave at George Washington University (GWU), promoting civil society and political pluralism. He said at GWU he was approached by a political officer at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, DC whom he believes is a security agent, and he said another Vietnamese security agent was present at a seminar at the American Enterprise Institute where Quan gave a similar presentation. This same agent

followed him back to Vietnam and was present at his arrest when he returned to Hanoi, Quan said.

13. (C) Quan, a practicing Catholic and legal expert, said he had three main concerns regarding religious freedom in Vietnam. First, the restitution of religious properties, nationalized during the war period and just after, has greatly affected the operation and growth of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. He said the GVN was considering issuing a new regulation on the return of religious properties but that it would be bad if passed as it would greatly limit the rights and claims of religious organizations. Secondly, he said the GVN is controlling the growth of religion through limitations on residency permits for priests, pastors, and other religious leaders. This issue continues to disrupt religious organization membership rolls and training opportunities. Finally, GVN authorities continue to put quotas on all religious training, limiting churches in recruitment and leadership training.

14. (C) Quan said that, in his view, religion, family, and private ownership are the "enemies" of all Communist Party-run states, and this was especially true in Vietnam. The State of Vietnam is threatened by those who place God above the supremacy of the State. The fear of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) of losing control has meant an inordinate amount of state resources spent on control mechanisms, and the Vietnamese people needed to challenge this. Quan said he did see hope in the future, however, and highlighted how modern day information technology and Internet usage, now spreading rapidly throughout Vietnam, had greatly assisted political and religious dissidents. Quan said the Vietnamese people were not as fearful today of confronting government authorities.

CYBER-DISSIDENT PHAM HONG SON

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15. (C) In an October 23 meeting at his residence, former prisoner and cyber-dissident Dr. Pham Hong Son (trained as a pharmaceutical doctor) gave an overview of the general human rights situation in Vietnam and responded to questions from two USCIRF staff members, accompanied by Embassy PolOff. Son is under house arrest, but the meeting at his residence was not obstructed by the security services. Dr. Son noted media coverage of USCIRF's visit to Vietnam on the evening news and said GVN officials had not been sincerely "constructive" with the delegation. He stated that the CPV was afraid of losing its hold in power, in part as it integrates with the international community with its recent WTO and UNSC memberships. He also said young Vietnamese, now more than ever, were openly expressing their political views on blogs, webchats and newsgroups, such as the Vietnamese version of BBC News online. As the State feels more threatened by any kind of political organization, fear among the general public, of a police crackdown and government-sponsored violence still remained strong, hindering organization of human rights and democracy activists.

16. (C) Responding to a question on the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and its leader the Venerable Thich Quang Do, Son told USCIRF the GVN is very fearful of Thich Quang Do's popularity. He said Thich Quang Do was highly respected among Vietnam's Buddhists, although much of the general public did not know a lot about the UBCV. According to Son, the UBCV was the only organization to publicly assist, financially and otherwise, the summer 2007 land rights protesters in Hanoi and HCMC, which greatly disturbed GVN authorities. Son said the GVN was also threatened by the UBCV because they had strong overseas financial and logistical support, including from entities within the United States.

¶17. (C) Turning to his ongoing covert democracy activism, Son said the underground democracy network of activists in Vietnam had developed a multi-step plan for fostering democracy in Vietnam. As Step 1, these activists are trying to build a solid consensus among a larger population of like-minded individuals for this plan before going to the next step. Son believes that a lack of consensus-building created rifts in the "Bloc 8406" democracy movement in 2006, when it launched, which undermined the potential for success of the movement.

¶18. (C) Step 2 of this current plan involves publicizing a strong argument attacking the legitimacy of Article Four of the Vietnamese Constitution, which gives political supremacy to the Communist Party of Vietnam and effectively outlaws other political parties. The activists allege Article Four is in conflict with other parts of the Vietnamese Constitution. Canceling or amending Article Four would then be the basis for Step 3 - calling for a multi-party, competitive political system and a chance to build a democratic state. Having created overwhelming public support for change, they would then call for free and fair elections, the final step. Son said his group of democracy activists is covertly seeking alliances within the National Assembly where he said there had been internal discussions about loosening up Article Four to allow the existence of other political parties. He said, however, that this had been very difficult because of the fear by many to speak out. Surveillance by the security services is also omnipresent. Son added that the network is studying the Founding Fathers of the United States and how they challenged the British and drafted a Constitution.

¶19. (C) Asked by a USCIRF staff member about the role of the international community and whether it should emphasize economic development over democratic development, Son said that pushing economic development in Vietnam without democracy leads to a growing distortion between rich and poor as the rich elite still holds the reins of power and reaps the benefits of economic development. He said the USG needed to continue following the human rights situation in Vietnam, be consistent in raising its support of human rights and the release of prisoners of conscience, and hold Vietnam to United Nations standards on human rights.

¶10. (U) USCIRF Chairman Cromartie cleared this cable.
MICHALAK